CHAPTER TEN

THE GENERATION IN-BETWEEN: THE PARTICIPATION OF GENERATION X IN LIFELONG LEARNING

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A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF GENERATION X

> Generation X is also more sharply polarized than the immediately preceding generation, and the dividing line has moved up the social hierarchy. It is true that the perplexing volatility of social placements, the dimness of prospects, the living from hand to mouth with no reliable chance of a durable, or at least longer term settlement, the vagueness of the rules that need to be learned and mastered to get by—these haunt them all without discrimination, breeding anxiety in everyone, stripping all or almost all members of their self-assurance and self-esteem. *(Bauman, 2004, p. 14)*

Bauman, in the quote above, provides a number of strong images, such as the harshness of living from hand to mouth and the pain of being stripped of self-assurance and self-esteem, to describe the situation of Generation X. Under this rubric being a member of Generation X brings with it a number of significant and daunting challenges, not the least of which is to be heard in the public square. As Generation X is a chronological cohort they have, nonetheless, demography on their side. The perspective of Generation X cannot be ignored as they assume more prominent positions in society. In the coming years their experiences will become pivotal in shaping public policy in a number of areas. The characteristics of Generation X are the subject of a sizeable literature and what is intended here is not a thorough review but rather the raising of a number of pertinent issues. The parameters of the definition of Generation X are usually related to those born between 1960 and 1975, although these boundaries are somewhat elastic especially at the upper end. Coupland (1991), one of the first writers to use the term Generation X, or Gen X, chose it as for him it describes well a group with no name or identity. The term is often used as a term of anger and alienation to

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describe those who considered that they had no identity and little voice (Dunn, 1993). The feeling of alienation of Gen X can be explained, in part, by the relationship between Gen X and those who preceded them—the Baby Boomers (Lipsky & Abrams, 1994).

The Boomers, those born between 1945 and 1960, were the children of post war prosperity and a certain cultural confidence that this generated. Boomers were often involved in a deliberate rebellion against societal and parental norms (Roof, 1993). To take one example, the years of the 1960s and 1970s, when Boomers were coming of age, were marked by stark changes in what previously had been seen as conventional sexual morality (Cohen, 1993). For Gen X, living in a time of relative social introspection, these and other historically divisive issues, and the decisions they entail, have been replaced by a range of uncontested options or choices (Mahedy & Bernardi, 1994).

Another aspect of the alienation of Gen X is that younger generations are now competing with them for a place in the public square. Members of Generation X born in 1960 are now well into their forties and cannot be described as young in any meaningful sense of the word. In societies where youth is esteemed, those who no longer fit the description can easily not be heard in discourses about the future. A small example of this is the amount of research money that is assigned by funding bodies into investigation of youth spirituality and the like compared with similar studies dedicated to those in their thirties and forties.

Mackay (1997) has described Gen X as the options generation and members of it as having the characteristic of being moral boundary riders. Having options brings with it freedom from commitment and little interest in ideology (Barna, 1994; Mackay, 1998). Generation X, it is argued, places far more emphasis than previous generations on the importance of human experience and is generally suspicious of institutional authority (Beaudoin, 1998). Generation X is also typified by a relative uncertainty about the future conditioned by a perception that the seemingly endless prosperity of the post war years has ended (Howe & Strauss, 1993). Other uncertainties also mark the adult world of Gen X. Bauman (1992) has described the postmodern landscape as one which is typified by a loss of belief in the grand narrative or story, and in which individuals need to rely much more on their own resources to create meaning, and these may change many times to suit particular circumstances. Usher (2001) goes further, describing one of the predominant modes of the postmodern as the inability to believe, as evidenced by incredulity at accepting any grand narrative. To live without a guidebook, to use Bauman's terminology, is not, however, easy and also undermines social cohesion (Bauman, 1993). To try and do so places great

emphasis on the individual and private sphere of life and on personal reflection especially as it relates to adapting to ever changing social and political contexts. For Bauman a suitable word to describe many contemporary adults is *strangers*, for whom bonds with others, and also with culturally held norms, are transitory and tenuous (Bauman, 2000). It is a world where optimism has been replaced with more cautious emotions, or to use another expression, postmodernity is a place we go *to hide from our fears*—fears here referring to the apprehension that comes from living in a world where old certainties have been removed (Bauman, 1992).

THE SEARCH FOR MEANING OF GENERATION X: A GENERATION OF LIFELONG LEARNERS?

There is one sense in which Gen X can be seen as lifelong learners par excellence. Bagnall (2001) points out that one dimension of educational discourse can be characterised by describing lifelong learning as a commitment to learning skills that are vocationally relevant. If lifelong learning is seen as a type of ongoing training, equipping the individual to meet the demands of ever-changing work and community circumstances, then members of Gen X, more than previous generations, are well accustomed to this type of activity. Their experience of various forms of vocational training is high and their participation in them reflects the experience and awareness of a population that expects to undergo this type of activity as part of a continuous process of upskilling. A number of factors related to changing conceptions of work and education militate against the participation of Gen X in those variants of lifelong learning that are not directed towards an immediate vocational or training purpose.

Members of Gen X experience of vocational training is one consequence of the worldwide implementation of rationalist economic paradigms, which first emerged in the later 1970s but which came to the fore in the following decades, a time when members of Gen X were first entering the adult job market or tertiary education in large numbers. A major change in the relationship between work, study and the individual is relevant here. The post-Fordist approach of contractual and transitory employment has changed the perception of work amongst Gen X. Whereas Boomers often experienced significant periods of stable employment, Gen X often move from different types of employment and much of this is part-time, casual or sessional. As a consequence of changed work patterns and relations individuals may have to retrain or acquire new skills on a regular basis. Despite this retraining and concentration on vocational education many members of

Generation X do not appear to be enjoying the economic fruits of a market-driven economy. One of the characteristic features of the postmodern economy is the disparity in the ability of social groups to accumulate capital. Typically this disparity is described as relating to different socioeconomic groups but is also a powerful descriptor of differences between chronological cohorts. Older generations, exemplified by Boomers, have benefited from the economic polices of governments across the Western world, which have favoured those with existing assets. Those without capital find it difficult to achieve financial security and are well described by the phrase widely used in Australia as the aspirational class, that is, those who see the achievement of a higher standard of living as their most important political aspiration. Adding to the financial burdens of Gen X are the rising costs of providing for an ageing population and the retraction of many state-sponsored welfare programs aimed at achieving social equity. All these factors tend to make Gen X poorer than their elders and the lack of financial security is a critical factor to understanding the participation of Gen X in lifelong learning. What is attractive for many people who are struggling to meet financial obligations are pathways that seem to lead to greater job and financial security, even if these goals do not materialise.

The educational experience of Gen X tends to reflect a more atomised and individual perspective, with emphasis on short work-related courses as opposed to liberal or generalised degrees. This trend is exacerbated by the high fees that now accompany tertiary education in most Western countries, and Australia is no exception to this. The commodification of education is one important way of understanding how participation in lifelong learning is interpreted by Gen X. Education is a commodity, the possession of which is seen as a means of assisting the worker to be seen as a more valuable agent in the workforce marketplace. As with all commodities education has to be capable of being measured against some agreed standard and the merits of one individual ranked against another. In practice this type of evaluation favours an education in skills and competencies that are reflective of a very market-driven understanding of education. In terms of teaching and learning what is valued is how well the program being offered, and by implication the student (or more properly termed, the consumer), achieves the agreed outcomes. This focus on the immediate and the achievable runs counter to many of the goals of lifelong learning which is oriented to the future and which changes to suit the individual needs of the learner. Implicit here is the notion that the learner will grow and mature and that their educational needs cannot be adequately covered by discrete outcomes.

The commodification of learning is however much more problematic, some would say impossible, if it is concerned with measuring genuine understanding and the development of the ability to critically reflect and assess the claims of a number of belief systems. This type of learning, however, is not the experience that most members of Gen X have of education certainly in the tertiary post-compulsory sector. The pressure to undertake courses that are regarded as giving *value for money*, which can be concluded quickly and are tied to current workplace expectations, militates against anyone engaging in more reflective and participatory approaches to education. One indication of the impact of these institutional educational changes is the decline in the number, character and values of those university faculties dedicated to liberal or non-vocational disciplines across the Western world, a trend that is likely to continue at a greater pace, with more small highly specialised institutions offering tailor-made courses that train students for specific employment roles. This will occur more frequently, as against interest in the courses offered by more traditional universities and tertiary institutions.

In a deeper sense lifelong learning is understood by some as the ongoing development of a critical reflective self, incorporating a satisfying and life-sustaining ethic that transcends the material satisfaction of the senses. Snook (2001) describes the goal of lifelong learning as directed towards developing the autonomy of individuals and their ability to be involved in critical thinking and liberating action. In these senses of the term the participation of Gen X in lifelong learning is far more problematic. If the goal of lifelong learning is to stimulate an open and critical engagement in society by the individual, a number of factors appear to work against the participation of Gen X in this endeavour. Firstly, one of the characteristic features of members of Generation X is that they lack trust in grand metanarratives, understood here in the sense of complex webs of meaning which provide individuals with a worldview that helps sustain them and gives their lives direction and meaning. The later half of the twentieth century was famous for the phenomenology of metanarratives allegedly coming adrift. For example, belief in the postulates of modernity, that society was developing progressively, positively and continually along agreed lines and that rational thought would increasingly lead to a more open and enlightened society, was severely tested by the calamitous wars of the twentieth century with their successive and subsequent atrocities. Also the challenge to empiricist assumptions in philosophy and social science rendered the tenure of scientific and simple notions of human progress unsustainable.

A more spectacular decline was the collapse of communist regimes all over the world. A less well-described demise was that of the metanarratives offered by mainline religious groups. The worldview of a coherent and self-contained belief system, intertwining metaphysics with Aristotelian ethics, that was an important part of, say, the Catholic identity for centuries came increasingly into question in the post-Vatican II era, the time after 1965 (Stacpoole, 1986). The correlative notions of exclusivity and absolute truth claims can lead to distinctive patterns of enculturation and socialisation but these were not available to members of Gen X who grew up within the Catholic tradition. This pattern was played out for members of other mainline traditions, notably Protestant ones which experienced a radical reassessment of what it meant to be Christian, far earlier than that experienced by Catholics (Kelley, 1972). Nonetheless, the parameters of the dilemma are the same. What had been an intact worldview that allowed for individuals to move into adulthood sustained and supported by a wider group sustained by common belief and practice was largely held in the suspense of disbelief, was evanescent, or had all but disappeared by the time that members of Gen X were making the transition into adulthood.

The examples above illustrate one of the most significance difficulties facing Gen X as lifelong learners. What do they bring to the task of creating for themselves a critical and reflective stance to any chance they have of contributing to society? The lack of attachment to a metanarrative is perhaps better described in their cases as a lack of substantial and initial engagement with a grand theory of the world and the place of the individual in it. Much of the writing around lifelong learning has centred on a discussion that contrasts previously held and relatively straightforward uncontested views with developing ones that are more sophisticated and tenuous. This is a classic example, however, of what has been described as a *Boomer dialogue*, that is, a conversation that is replete with meaning for an older age group but one with which Generation X has trouble engaging (Rymarz, 1999). Lifelong learning in the so-called Third Age well describes this process where individuals develop and refine their position becoming more critical and participatory. An important feature of this process is that it proceeds from an existing belief system and significant life experience. This can be characterized by the phrase, '*I once believed and did this but now I have changed my position to this*'. If we accept, and I believe we should, the definition of Generation X as those who have not engaged with any metanarrative then how can we describe their developing worldview? What is it developing from? What is it developing to?

In order to participate critically in lifelong learning members of Generation X are often engaged in a search for meaning. 'Meaning' has a number of senses in modern philosophical discourse. Popper (1972) based his discussion of meaning on the principle of falsifiability. This provides a mechanism for distinguishing between the disciplines such as the sciences, which generate theories that can be disproved, and other disciplines such as theology, which are usually based on irrefutable claims. Another way of discussing meaning is to link it with the idea of verification. The verification principle, simply put, claims that for statements to have meaning they must be able to be verified by observation (Ayer, 1946). Both these approaches describe restricted understandings of how the term meaning can be used. As Parkinson (1976) points out they have applicability in some instances but cannot be applied in all circumstances, especially to concepts that lack an empirical base.

Another perspective, which will be followed here, sees meaning as being heavily connected to the context in which the term is used (Grant, 1956). Moral philosophers, for example, will use and develop a technical language, and meaning will be understood in a particular way by those in this discipline. This approach can be contrasted with other perspectives such as linguistics or logic, which have a far different understanding of what meaning is and how discussions around the concept should be shaped. The search for meaning is also a good example of a concept that will be understood differently and is dependent on how it is being used. In this chapter, the search for meaning will be used in an existential sense, that is, how it affects individuals and how they live their lives.

Meaning here is understood as a three-fold phenomenon, following the discussion provided by Brennan (2001). On the one hand the search for meaning can be understood as seeking the experience of being a part of an intimate and compassionate community, where the contribution of the individual is valued and perhaps most importantly, where the individual is recognised and not seen as part of an undifferentiated mass. This dimension of the search for meaning can be seen as an antidote for the social isolation of Generation X, an attempt to overcome the pervasive feeling of being strangers. Another aspect of the search for meaning is an experience of the transcendent or a belief system that moves beyond the individual and the satisfaction of his or her immediate needs. This aspect of the search for meaning can also be described as seeking to find a suitable metanarrative with which the individual can identify. The final dimension of the search for meaning is the sense that Generation X is seeking a sense of purpose. This can be expressed in the desire to see themselves as part of a wider mission,

that is, associating with others who share similar goals, ideas and aspirations and who are not brought together simply on the basis of common fears or concerns.

The search for meaning is not a unique experience within the Western tradition. Writers from Augustine to Spinoza and beyond have wrestled with questions of belief and identity. The ability to grasp the need to construct meaning is a concept that is central to many areas of philosophical, psychological and educational enquiry. It has a philosophical dimension that is developed in the writings of a number of modern philosophers such as Quine, Popper or Habermas. Quine, for example, sees knowledge, among other things, as building up a complex web of inter-related ideas (Quine, 1974; Quine & Ulman, 1970). This process begins with rudimentary concepts well understood and well integrated. To Habermas, gaining knowledge is seen as a movement through three different sequential levels or stages of cognition, beginning with technical competence (Habermas, 1987). It is not being suggested that there is agreement between these approaches, but that they illustrate the need to develop, from a philosophical perspective, a belief system from core or primary ideas. The need to develop a coherent worldview is also a theme in much contemporary psychological discourse. The writings of Viktor Frankl, for example, are premised on the need for people to find and cultivate meaning in their lives (Frankl, 1967). Gaining such a meaning is described as a necessity and a key indicator of mental health. Frankl was the originator of *logotherapy*. The judgments and actions of this school of psychotherapy are rooted in the belief that ultimately humans are meaning-oriented creatures. From this perspective the search for meaning is far more important than the desire to find physical pleasure and comfort. Finally the process of meaning construction is a crucial aspect of contemporary approaches to quality learning and teaching. These approaches stress the need for conceptual learning to be seen as a sophisticated system of inter-related knowledge (White & Gunstone, 1992). The key is to make links between existing beliefs and knowledge. Without a core of fundamental or primary building blocks, however, deep understanding can never develop (Stodolsky, 1988). These core or primary concepts are then elaborated and connected with other knowledge and beliefs to develop an increasingly sophisticated understanding of the world. This type of thinking is often used to describe understanding in disciplines such as science and mathematics. It also has relevance for the evolving critical consciousness. The process being described here is very much a process of meaning construction and this makes it pertinent to any discussion of the search for meaning in the case of Generation X. Interestingly the process of deconstruction also has a parallel in contemporary approaches to learning. This occurs when a faulty or imperfect

understanding has become ingrained. Before any real learning can take place these imperfect understandings need to be exposed, identified and corrected or discarded.

ASSISTING THE GEN X LIFELONG LEARNER

Generation X's search for meaning appears not to have originated from strong formative experiences, powerful memories or conceptually challenging educational programs. Indeed what characterised this period was the saturation of competing belief systems presented vicariously but without any authentication of a particular one. One of the characteristics of the postmodern is a multitude of choices, but without the authority, be it internal or external, to critically evaluate differing perspectives. Encountering a welter of competing theories can be disempowering.

The process of constructing a cogent and sustaining belief system can, however, be one of discovery for many members of Gen X and is well described as lifelong learning. This can bring with it a freshness and originality that is open to looking anew at ideas that have the potential to develop into sustaining webs of meaning. At the very least what is required if Generation X is to participate in an emancipatory lifelong learning is a familiarity with the language and symbols of Western culture. If a group does not share a common language or languages then this can cause divisiveness and alienation because some members of a community have no way of understanding the collective history and culture. This is not simplistic nostalgia, a longing for something to cling to in a confusing and complex world. Nor is it a view that sees the immediate past as a mythical golden era. The sense of valuing the past has a much more contemporary tone: it is about owning a heritage and feeling comfortable in it. It is about being discerning and having the confidence and skill to use great themes and concepts to develop a contemporary and relevant way of becoming critical and reflective members of society, whose contribution to and participation in it is welcomed, required and valued.

There are many ways to proceed here but two suggestions about assisting the lifelong learning of members of Gen X will be offered here. Firstly, they often display a lack of connectedness or involvement with support networks. A critical aspect of the search for meaning is the need to feel valued as a part of a human community. Genuine lifelong learning is also greatly facilitated by the integration of the individual into supportive learning communities. To help establish these

communities when social factors encourage privatisation of learning and the isolation of individuals is a significant challenge. The counter-cultural nature of this endeavor may, however, provide some hope as individuals who are interested in this type of discourse could be empowered by the fact that they are going against contemporary practice and seeking rewards that are not easily operationalised. The participation of Generation X in lifelong learning may be a reflection of their search for a vision of life and culture that is presented as positive, welcoming and is lived out in a concrete way. This search, however, may be highly personal, as it reflects choices that set them apart from what have become conventional ways of learning.

The second point is to be clearer about the distinctive features of what being a critical and reflective member of society means. It should be possible to mark out a large area of common interests that enable members of Gen X to presume and speak to a common heritage and understanding. If this demand were better and more forcefully articulated, the search for identity amongst Gen X could be more clearly directed, especially if we consider the base that many are starting from. This type of learning could become, amongst other things, an ongoing self-generating program as more and more links are established between existing concepts and new understandings with elaborate webs of meaning established. Once this type of cognitive infrastructure starts to develop then it is possible to speak of a sense of purpose, which is such an important aspect of the search for meaning, beginning to take shape.

The era which marked the adolescence and young adulthood of those born in the years of the 1960s and 1970s was a time still very much influenced by the unresolved debates and in some ways overwhelming pluralism that developed in Western society in the latter half of the twentieth century. The advantage of working with people who are not, in a sense, doing their learning by reacting to prior knowledge or experience is a considerable one. The first members of Generation X are now over 40 years of age. The views of this group will become more prominent and in due course their dialogue will inevitably replace those of older people. This dialogue will be much more about who we want to be, rather than who we were and are no longer.

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